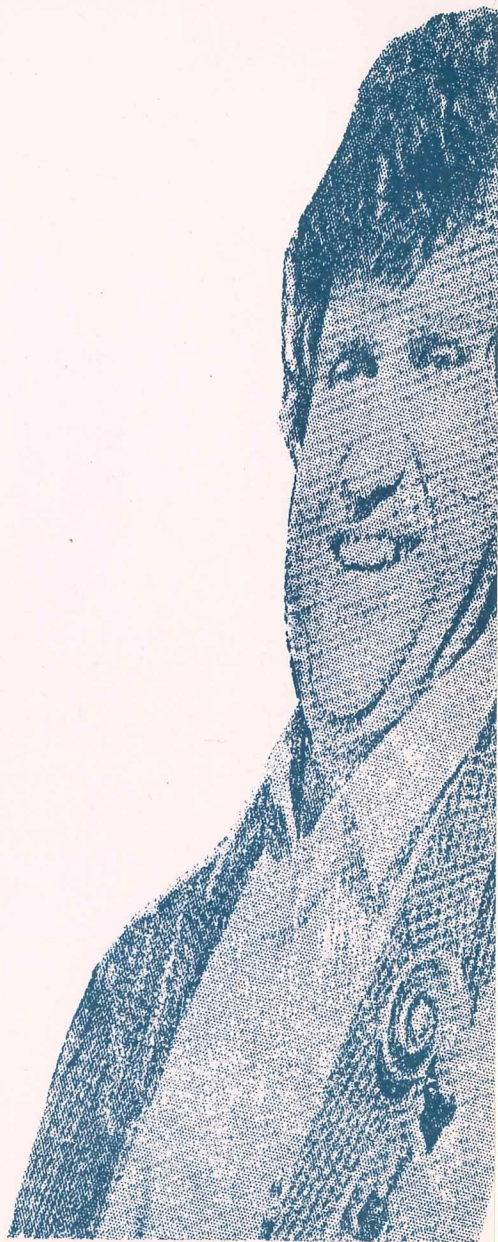


New Music Concerts



Bass Bonanza
Sun January 14/90

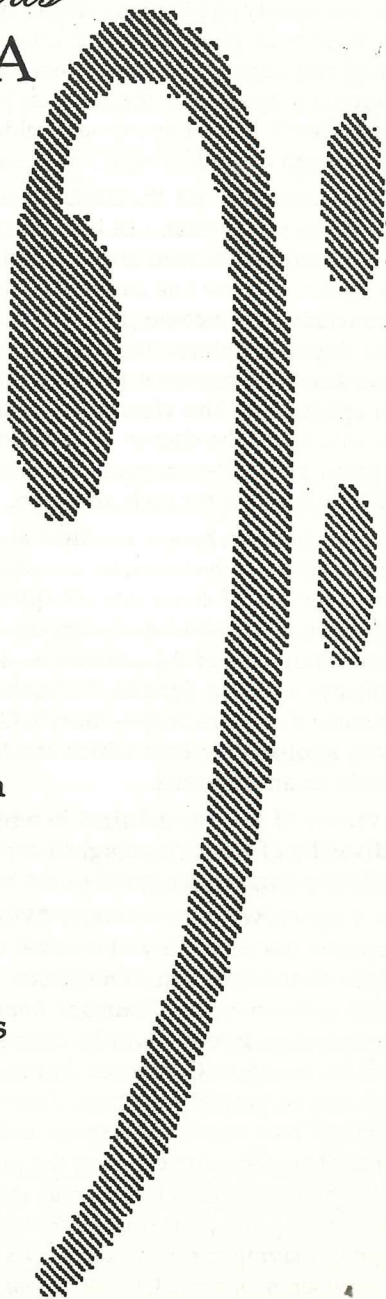
New Music Concerts

BASS BONANZA

Premiere Dance Theatre, Toronto,
8pm Sunday January 14th 1990.

notes by John Oswald

Unlike such corny tags as *Hornucopia*, *Flute Cocktail*, or *Pianorama*, indicating an esprit seldom found in the titles of the pieces programmed for such concoctions¹, the semantic resonance in the alliterative appellation *Bass Bonanza* is appropriately fundamental. The word bonanza is Spanish. It refers to a rich or unexpected bounty in an otherwise austere environment. It was also the title of the most popular North American television series of the 1960's, a period when compositions for bass demanded the extended techniques of a Bertram Turetzky or a Fernando Grillo, and the amplification of the instrument in jazz² by musicians such as Scott LaFaro enabled the biggest of the viols to be noticed among the forays of topless cellists and dark Velvet violists³.



The bass-ic character on the 'Bonanza' TV show was Hoss Cartwright, as large and sturdy as his name would indicate; dependable, soft-spoken, a little slow both physically and intellectually, with a generally good-natured response to ridicule. These same characteristics have been traditionally applied to the musical bass (the fish of the same name is another story). It is an instrument seldom offered more than supporting roles or those with a comic streak, as in Saint-Saen's 'L'Elephant'.

Chamber literature for the double-bass (a.k.a. bass fiddle, contrabass, bass viol, violine, string bass, and basso profondo) has been sparse compared to that afforded its kin who found membership in the venerable string quartet (two violins and not one bass!). Perhaps the nebulous specifications of its construction, which could provide for instruments of such varied deportment as the slope-shouldered Italian bass, the rotund German bass, the three-quartersize bass, ancestral violines, and basses with an extra string or an extra appendage. The viola also has never settled into an authorized set of dimensions, but the degree of variation found in violas is infinitesimal compared to the distortions of the bass body, and the pedigree of the violin would never allow for such mutation.

The most common bass of our time is an even further deviation. It has lost its bow and its body has shrunk to a cavity-less slab. It is always amplified: without the aid of electricity it's quieter than a clavichord. In recent years it has further diminished to the approximate size and shape of a cricket bat⁴. The awkward size of the acoustic bass (in some cases too big to fit in a taxi, but always a bit too light to obtain the furniture status of a piano) has kept instrument designers busy—Marvin Green of Toronto has designed the Cravat, a collapsible bass which can be doubled over, deflated, and carried as easily as an umbrella.

The variety of shapes and sizes in which we find the bass is complimented by the diversity of works in tonight's concert. For instance two of the works are, to differing degrees, assigned to the bass by default.

John Cage's revolutionary work '26'1.1499 for a String Player' (1955) introduced the possibility of musical development being exclusively in the timbral colouring of a sustained note. The note itself is transformed by sound. But the instrument in '*Composed Improvisation for Electric Bass*' is designed for pizzicati or, in other words, discrete events. Cage applies the same principles found in '*Composed Improvisation for Snare Drum*' (in fact the two pieces can be played together). The readily distinguishing characteristic of the electric bass version is a specification to perform *sforzando* one Bartok pizzicato⁵ at some point during the piece, "in memoriam Marcel Duchamp". (Mr Occhipinti assures us that this event will occur towards the middle of his performance.) The performer predetermines by chance operations of his or her choosing (playing cards in this case) 3 time points between zero and 8 minutes, one to 8 events, one to 64 icti (stresses) composed of pitches, dynamics on a scale of one to 5, and the electronic processing of notes.

Improvisation and interpretation are degrees of similar intent in performance. One may quibble about whether a graphic score such as Hans Joachim Hespos' *Z-Dor* requires a purely interpretive attitude for its performance or if a dollop of improvisation is needed. Opinion's similarly differ about Hespos' work in general. A most provocative assessment was this rendering of statements made in a lecture by Morton Feldman: "And this guy Hespos! He's somebody they should have _____. ... They should _____ him. He's so _____ that next year they're performing his opera in Hamburg."⁶ Although Feldman's sentiments may be clear to those familiar with his work and opinions, the obscuring of the quote is perfectly in keeping with opinions for and against Hespos (fill in the blanks with the sentiments of your choice).

*Z-Dor*⁷ which can be realized by any one or two instruments (there is a commercial recording of it for percussion) was created for a dance by the White Planet, and was played by Wolfgang Güttler, to whom it is dedicated, in its premier performance. It will be heard tonight as it was then, on the double bass.

Giacinto Scelsi is another controversial composer with the latest onslaught coming posthumously. His assistant and collaborator has claimed authorship of many of Scelsi's pieces. If there is some truth in this assertion, then the composer is still alive and potentially active, but not as inclined, it seems, to Scelsi's "annulment of creative individuality."⁸

Scelsi composed a number of solos for strings beginning with "Coleocanth" for viola (1955). "Ko-tha" (1967) calls for the preparation or ornamentation of strings which in the case of the bass necessitates laying the instrument on its back.

"*C'est bien la nuit*" may sound very classical but it harbours a sarcastic reflection on the powers of darkness.

Uros Rojko's *Tongen II fur zwei Kontrabäse und Verstärkung* is a study in articulation of a gradual progression of pitch material. The finely calligraphed extended notation of this Yugoslavian composer's score includes a vocabulary of indications for various modulations within glissandi, navigations of exotic geography (between the bridge and tail piece) and rapid, "nervous" flageolet tones or harmonics. The two basses are tuned a quartertone apart.

Joel Quarrington's performance of David Ellis' '*Sonata*' (1977) marks the reprise of his winning performance a decade ago at the Isle of Man International Double Bass Competition. The one movement piece is a slow rondo.

Christoph Staude is a very young German composer who came to Wolfgang Güttler's attention when he was selected out of several hundred entries as the winner of the Trio Basso competition. '*Three Delirien*', described by Mr Güttler as within the compass of conventional technique, explores the limits of dynamics, register, and articulation. Although the three movements into

"delirium" are of slow tempi, the playing is virtuosic; packed with fast high trills, microtones, harmonics and pretzel-fingered chords.

Bulgarian composer **Emil Tabakov** is also a double bass player and conductor of the Russe State Philharmonic Orchestra. *'Motivy'* is one of many works he has written for the double bass. It's in four sections, alternating largo and prestissimo, full of fluctuating time signatures, as in succeeding bars of 13/8, 12/8, 13/8, 11/8, and 10/8, in the spirit of the indigenous rhythms of the composer's homeland.

Canadian composer **John Burge** writes that *"Interplay"*, a single movement work, attempts to create an artistic and expressive statement out of the many varied and diverse effects that can be created on this large instrument which is so often relegated to the basement of both orchestral and chamber music. By employing only the double bass, and three of them at that, the composer is forced to explore the extremities of the instrument, and in particular the upper register.

"Broadly speaking, a large portion of the thematic material found in *Interplay* can be characterized with one of the three following descriptions: tightly chromatic gestures that often revolve collectively around a common pitch; solo passages of a more lyrical nature which are usually accompanied by rather stationary lines; and sections of music that are more rhythmically energetic, often involving short ostinato passages that are occasionally deployed between two instruments in an interlocking fashion. The music that is found at the very beginning of the work clearly displays these three qualities in immediate succession."

Burge, who teaches composition and analysis at Queen's University and has won an unprecedented five Young Composers Awards from PROCAN, claims to be unable to begin composing a work until he has found an appropriate title. The "interplay" referred to here is of the thematic material as well as between the musicians who half way through the work are given phrases with no connecting metre, which are played with an intuitive responsiveness.

Tiberiu Olah is Romania's leading composer of film music. Among his early influences were inevitably Bartok, and early Schoenberg. *'Metamorphosen'* is based on the 24th of Paganini's 'Capricci'. Each time the theme reappears it is transformed, until it completely metamorphosizes for its last appearance into another unexpected but entirely familiar melody. With the two basses reaching into their upper range the piece could almost have been scored for three flutes.

The major 20th Century form for the improvisation Cage used to habitually dismiss is, of course, Jazz. Guest composer **Don Thompson** is no stranger to its requirements. If we scale Jazz's history to parallel the European tradition, with Dixieland/Renaissance, BeBop/Baroque and Big Band/Romanticism, then Thompson is a Neo-Classicist of the Post Bop period⁹. *'Quartet '89'* is his first commission from New Music Concerts. It is by and large unabashedly a jazz-sounding piece in 3/4 with improvisational solos intermixed with material written in the style of jazz soloing.

¹ Some exceptions being the following titles:

"The Last Contrabass in Las Vegas" (Eugene Kurtz), "The Middle-aged Person's Guide to the Contrabass" (S.R.Beckler), "Doublebasses at Twenty Paces" (Pauline Oliveros), "Failing, A difficult piece for solo string bass" (Tom Johnson), and, of course, "Bert Bells, Bows, Balls the Bass" (Frank McCarty).

² Prior to amplification, bassists in jazz usually had to whack the strings with force in order to be heard during fervent ensemble playing, which considerably limited finesse. A solo improvisation allotted to the instrument in this context usually entailed having the rest of the ensemble shut up and a lull imposed in the din of the jazz club, so the bass could be heard. One story had a visitor to an exotic location puzzled by the incessant drumming issuing from the jungle. To his enquiries on the subject all the local inhabitants replied "Drums play— good sign; drums stop— BAD SIGN!". Following several days and sleepless nights of this good sign the visitor was walking by the jungle one afternoon when suddenly the drums stopped. Distressed by this omen he pointed out the sudden cessation to an old man nearby. "Yes" the elder said, "Drums play— good sign; drums stop— BAD SIGN— BASS SOLO!"

³ Charolette Moorman and John Cale respectively.

⁴ The cricket bat shaped Steinberger Bass need only be mentioned in that it is mentioned as a result of commission funding by the Steinberger company in the original title of the Cage piece "Composed Improvisation for Steinberger Electric Bass". Mr Occhipinti has determined that other brands of electric bass can be used to produce a satisfactory realization of the piece.

⁵ Bartok pizzicati require snapping the strings at an angle which will cause them to bounce off the fingerboard.

⁶ from Musik-Konzepte v.48/49, translated from German (which was translated from Feldman's Brooklynese) by Rod Sharman. A footnote was attached to the quote, in which the editors pointed out: "In actual fact the premiere of the opera by Hans-Joachim Hespos took place in Frankfurt. The blanks indicate unpublishable invectives." The final blank was inserted by the present author.

⁷ involving Mioritical Space

⁸ Claudio Annibaldi, New Grove.

⁹ Following this analogy through to the present, if Charlie Parker corresponds to Beethoven, then Ornette Coleman resembles Schoenberg (somewhat theoretical and more influential than popular); Boulez's aggressiveness is more than matched by Cecil Taylor's; a popular minimizing of certain elements by Miles Davis in the late sixties occurred during the rise of Steve Reich; and nowadays we have a bit of everything including period purists like Wynton Marsalis. Electric bass player Jaco Pastorius likened himself to both Jimi Hendrix and Paganini.

PROGRAM

- | | | |
|--|---------------------------|--------|
| UROS ROJKO (Yugoslavia)
Wolfgang Güttler, double bass
Joel Quarrington, double bass | <i>Tongen II</i> | (1986) |
| GIACINTO SCELSI (Italy)
Wolfgang Güttler, double bass | <i>C'est bien la nuit</i> | (1932) |
| DAVID ELLIS (Great Britain)
Joel Quarrington, double bass | <i>Sonata</i> | (1977) |
| CHRISTOPH STAUDE (W. Germany)
Wolfgang Güttler, double bass | <i>3 Delirien</i> | (1987) |
| EMIL TABAKOV (Bulgaria)
Joel Quarrington, double bass | <i>Motivy</i> | (1968) |
| HANS-JOACHIM HESPOS (W. Germany)
Wolfgang Güttler, double bass | <i>Z-Dor</i> | (1977) |
| JOHN BURGE (Canada)
Wolfgang Güttler, double bass
Roberto Occhipinti, double bass
Joel Quarrington, double bass | <i>Interplay *</i> | (1989) |

INTERMISSION

JOHN CAGE (U.S.A.) *Composed Improvisation for Electric Bass* (1987)
Roberto Occhipinti, double bass

TIBERIU OLAH (Romania) *Metamorphosen*** (1983)
Robert Aitken, flute
Wolfgang Güttler, double bass
Joel Quarrington, double bass

DON THOMPSON (Canada) *For Scott LaFaro* (1982)
Don Thompson, double bass
Roberto Occhipinti, double bass

DON THOMPSON (Canada) *Quartet '89*** (1989)
Wolfgang Güttler, double bass
Roberto Occhipinti, double bass
Joel Quarrington, double bass
Don Thompson, double bass

**commissioned by New Music Concerts*

***World Premiere*

performers:

Wolfgang Güttler was born in 1945 in Kronstadt, Rumania. His teachers were J.Prunner and J.Cheptea. In 1973 he was a prize winner in the International Music Competition in Geneva, Switzerland. From 1975 to 1985 he was a member of the Berlin Philharmonic, Herbert Von Karajan's orchestra. Since then he's been Professor of Double Bass at the Conservatory in Cologne. He has been a member of Trio Basso since 1982, appearing with them in a New Music Concert in Toronto in 1987. He is also a member of the Consortium Classicum and of the European Master Orchestra. He gives master classes at the Julliard School of Music and in France, Italy and Austria.

Roberto Occhipinti, a frequent performer with New Music Concerts, is principal bass with the Esprit Orchestra and is also an active member of Toronto's Arraymusic Ensemble which has just returned from a tour of the England, Scotland and Ireland. He has performed with the Canadian Opera Company, Winnipeg Symphony and Hamilton Philharmonic as well as in jazz ensembles, salso and R&B bands, Broadway musicals and jingles. He has written music for band, pop, radio dramas and small films.

Toronto born **Joel Quarrington** has been the recipient of several awards including 1st prize in the 1976 CBC Talent Festival and the Silver Medal (highest award given) in the 1978 Geneva International Competition. As well as his many activities as a teacher, chamber musician and soloist, Mr Quarrington is principle bassist of the Hamilton Philharmonic and a co-founder of the Amadeus Ensemble of Toronto. In September of 1984 he toured the People's Republic of China with a septet comprised of some of Canada's finest musicians, and in some Chinese cities presented the first public bass solos to be heard.

Don Thompson is a very active jazz performer and composer. His ability to double (triple?) with equal proficiency on bass, piano and vibes is rare. He has recorded eleven albums as a leader, two of which won Junos. He has worked with many of the jazz greats including Jim Hall, Paul Desmond, Sonny Greenwich, Frank Rosolino, George Shearing, Milt Jackson, James Moody, Barney Kessel, and John Handy.



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New Music Concerts is generously supported by The Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council, the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto, the Toronto Arts Council and the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture through its "Investment in the Arts" program. Steinway pianos from Remenyi House of Music.

New Music Concerts congratulates the Canadian Music Centre on its 30th anniversary, and we would like to express our thanks for the important service it provides.

This evening's performance is presented in association with CBC-FM Stereo's *Two New Hours* for broadcast at a future date.

Thanks to JIM SHEDDEN at Innis College and THE GOETHE INSTITUTE.

FILM SERIES

NEW MUSIC CONCERTS continues to present the North American premiere of the film series *Sound & Silence*, a set of 20 composer portraits, ranging from up and coming composers from across the globe to established artists such as Berio, Xenakis and Penderecki. The films, produced by Poland TV and Katharine Adamov Films, were directed by Andrzej Kostenko and hosted by Rolf Liebermann. Zygmunt Krauze acted as artistic director in the series, in which John Cage appears as special commentator. The season's schedule for film showings is as follows:

January 24, 1990

Clarence Barlow (Germany)

Luciano Berio (Italy)

Chen Yi (China)

Barry Conyngham (Australia)

February 16, 1990

Anders Hillborg (Sweden)

Krzysztof Penderecki (Poland)

Gutama Soegijo (Indonesia)

Judith Weir (Great Britain)

March 23, 1990

Luis Andriessen (Netherlands)

Aaron Kernis (U.S.A.)

Lam Man Yee (Hong Kong)

Martin Smolka (Czechoslovakia)

April 20, 1990

Hollos Mate (Hungary)

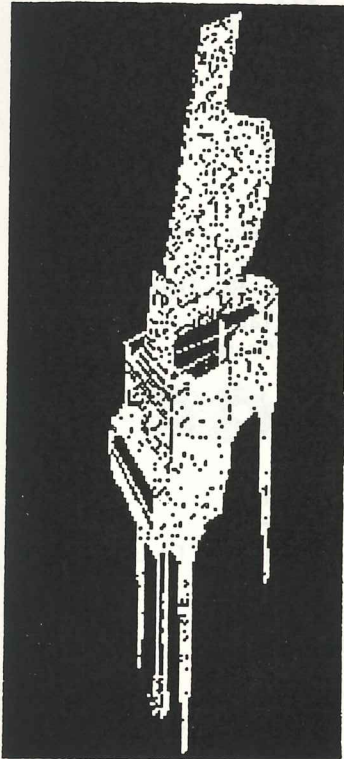
Anna Lara (Mexico)

Jukka Tiensuu (Finland)

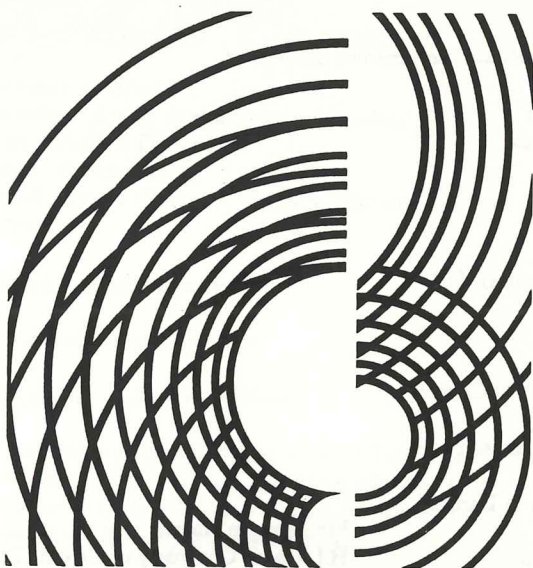
Iannis Xenakis (France)

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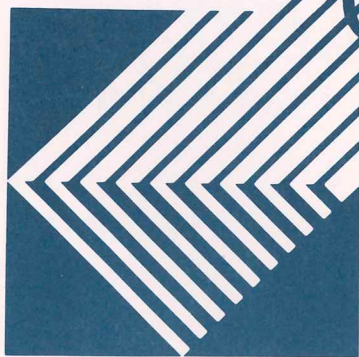
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